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“Women Supporting Women”: How San Jose Became the Feminist Capital of the World

Maggie Oys

As the only sitting woman member on the San Jose City Council in 1971, Janet Gray Hayes repeatedly faced strategic blocking by the “gang of four,” four male San Jose City councilman l that united in a majority to impede Hayes, the only female member. To combat the sexist political sequestering Hayes experienced from her male colleagues, she decided the best solution would be to get more women representatives on the city council, as she was quoted, “I wanted to work with the Council and I found with the gang of four that was next to impossible, so I said well, the next best thing is to get some more women elected.”¹ At that moment, Hayes sparked a movement among women of San Jose in the 1970s to run for political office and gain greater political representation, turning San Jose into what would be called the “Feminist Capital of the World” by *Newsweek*.

The city of San Jose and surrounding area of Santa Clara County, now defined as “Silicon Valley”, is characterized by a traditionally male dominated major tech companies and startups. However, female representatives dominated the political arena in the area between the 1970s and late 1980s, with the election of Janet Gray Hayes as mayor of San Jose in 1975, becoming the first elected female mayor of a major US city of over 500,000 people.² Hayes’ election as mayor of San Jose ushered in a wave of female elected officials in local government, culminating in the election of seven women representatives to San Jose’s City Council, one of

¹ Janet Gray Hayes, interview by Danelle Moon and Aime McNamara, April 12, 2006, Bay Area Feminists Oral History Project, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

² Danelle Moon, "Storming Politics: San José Women in the “Feminist Capital, 1975-2006," *Social Science History Association* (2006), 2.

the few female majorities in the nation.³ The unprecedented number of women elected to San Jose city government caught the nation's attention, as San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley was dubbed, "The Feminist Capital of the World." The two decades of female political activism and successful election of women candidates to local offices between the 1970s and 1980s constituted a rare period of women dominating a local political arena, which has rarely been replicated as successfully in most areas of the United States until very recently. The unprecedented number of women politicians elected during this period stemmed from an attitude and consensus among women in local politics of "women supporting women" through grassroots political organizations, exemplified by active local chapters of the National Organization of Women and the League of Women Voters. In short, women elected officials actively encouraged and endorsed the election of other female politicians to elected offices.

Previous scholarship on women in politics and second wave feminism suggest that women are more successful in local, municipal elections due to their community involvement and the lower stakes associated with local politics, rather than state and national elections where women often struggle to run successful campaigns.⁴ Therefore, traditionally most women in politics serve in offices at the county and city levels.⁵ Danelle Moon has investigated the significance of the women elected representatives in San Jose during the era of San Jose as the "Feminist Capital of the World," attributing the electoral success of these women to the demographics and affluence of the Silicon Valley and the local grassroots, political organization.⁶ Janet Flammang has asserted that the combination of highly educated voters, a high voter

³ Janet A Flammang, "Female Officials in the Feminist Capital: The Case of Santa Clara County," *The Western Political Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1985).

⁴ Kelly Wallace, "More Women Are Signing up to Run for Office, but Will They Succeed?" CNN, June 21, 2017.

⁵ Flammang "Female Officials," 94.

⁶ Moon, "Storming Politics," 18.

turnout, and the high median income and affluence of the Santa Clara Valley created a unique environment in which women could be successfully elected to local government.⁷ This paper builds upon Moon's scholarship and research by elaborating on the importance of grassroots, political organization to the successful election of women to local elected positions. This paper provides a closer examination of the culture of "women supporting women" in office, through campaign support, political endorsements, personal mentorship and coalition building among women elected representatives. Finally, this paper concludes by refuting Flammang's argument that the high levels of education and wealth in the San Jose area significantly contributed to the success of women politicians. Instead, this paper argues that the mechanisms women on the ground and running for office used to campaign, win elections, endorse other women for office and support each other once in office resulted in the successful elections of large proportions of women in San Jose, not attributed to education and income demographics of the area.

Women's Issues on the Political Agenda

The election of Janet Gray Hayes as Mayor of San Jose, the first female mayor of a major US city marked one of the defining moments of San Jose's era as the "Feminist Capital of the World." With Janet Gray Hayes in the city's highest office, she inspired a flood of women to campaign for elected offices at the city level, which resulted in an unprecedented majority female San Jose City Council.⁸ By 1981, seven women were elected to the San Jose City Council, comprising an unprecedented female majority on the city's council. Women also constituted a majority of San Jose's Board of Supervisors, during a period when only 6% of women held county positions and only 13% held city positions nationally, further characterizing San Jose as a rarity for their representation

⁷ Flammang, "Female Officials," 97-99.

⁸ Moon, "Storming Politics," 3.

of women in government, and a model for gender equality at the municipal level.⁹ With Hayes as mayor and a female majority on the City Council, San Jose became a beacon of feminism and female representation in politics, with only 6% of cities having a female major and only six other city councils holding female majorities in the US in 1978.¹⁰

The greater proportion of women elected representatives in government also meant that women's issues and women's voices rose to the forefront of San Jose city politics. The feminist bloc on San Jose's city government provided an opportunity to promote and endorse issues specific to women, that are so often silenced and overlooked in American politics, such as pay equity, rape counseling services, domestic violence, childcare, and a children's center. The women that dominated San Jose city politics in the 1970s and 1980s particularly prioritized the issue of equal pay and comparable worth.¹¹ The women of this female dominated era of San Jose politics accomplished contributions to local gender equality and government services for women, including focuses on sex discrimination cases, especially in the growing Silicon Valley tech industry, comparable worth, and county funding for battered women's shelters.¹² Therefore, these women representatives not only sought equality in government positions, but prioritized women's issues in their political agendas and utilized their opportunity and positions to help local women, fight for women's rights and further the feminist movement politically.

Grassroots, Political Organizations

Grassroots political organizations led by women enabled local, civically engaged women to get involved in local politics and support women candidates that represented their political agenda, focusing in San Jose on slow growth, urban planning,

⁹ Moon, "Storming Politics," 9.

¹⁰ Flammang, "Female Officials," 95.

¹¹ Moon, "Storming Politics," 3.

¹² Flammang, "Female Officials," 107.

maintaining neighborhoods, honesty and integrity in government, and bringing women's issues to the forefront of city politics. Women political candidates tended to rely more on grassroots political organizations, as opposed to men who ran based on their professional careers.¹³ The National Organization of Women (NOW) and the League of Women voters were two of the most prominent grassroots political organizations led by women with local chapters in the South Bay. The South Bay Chapter of NOW encouraged their local members to run for office, sought out and trained prospective candidates, encouraged local women to run on women's issues, and supported women candidates in their campaigns.¹⁴ NOW focused on getting women into office who would use their power to make societal changes in the United States toward gender equality and women's rights, as a part of the broader feminist movement. As opposed to more radical sects of the feminist movement, NOW offered a place for politically active wives and mothers to seek government reforms and a recognition of all women as equal partners with men at every level of society, and especially in politics. Organizations such as NOW helped support women candidates, such as Mayor Janet Gray Hayes, a member of NOW, through campaigning and promoting her as a mayoral candidate.¹⁵ The community and coalition of women in the South Bay through grassroots organizations initially got women involved in politics, and then supported and elected women candidates through successful campaigns. When asked years later if she was a member of NOW, Hayes responded, "Yes. NOW, always have been," illustrating the significance of grassroots political organizations for women.¹⁶

¹³ Flammang, "Female Officials," 100.

¹⁴ Maryann Barasko, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2004, 44. Joan Bradford to NOW South Bay Chapter, July 1972, Box 2, National Organization for Women San Jose/South Bay Chapter records, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

¹⁵ Janet Gray Hayes, interview by Danelle Moon, 2006.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The League of Women Voters also offered local women in the South Bay the opportunity to participate in the political scene, engaging women to vote and have their voices heard and interests represented. Local chapters of the League put on Candidate nights for local elections, sent out unbiased voter guides, set up Candidate fairs and debates in order to inform and educate local women about the voting and political process, encouraging women to vote independently based on their individual views, opinions and interests. The League, less political and feminist leaning than NOW, offered unbiased, objective voter information to inform and engage local women in politics. Many of the female elected officials from the era of San Jose as “the Feminist Capitol” started their political participation and activism through the League, such as Janet Gray Hayes.¹⁷ Hayes credits the League for her initial involvement in San Jose politics because the League offered an opportunity for women, especially wives and mothers, to get involved in politics and truly learn the political process, looking at both sides of issues and encouraging debates.¹⁸ Susie Wilson, former San Jose city councilmember, also acknowledged the significance of the League in making important connections among women politicians.¹⁹ Both the League of Women Voters and NOW shared the common goal of electing more women to government office, which Susan Hammer, a member of San Jose’s female dominated City Council, used to define what feminism meant to her: female political participation and representation.²⁰

Platform for Women Candidates and Community Driven Politics

¹⁷ Joan Jackson, “Janet Gray Hayes, But She Picks Political Ring,” *San Jose Mercury News*, June 13, 1971.

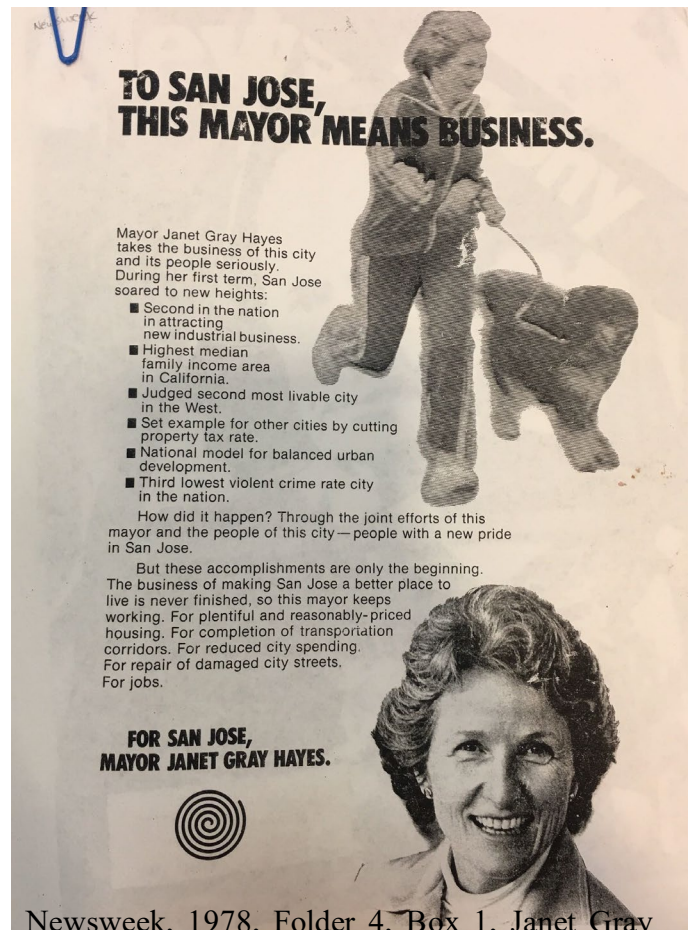
¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Susie Wilson, Interview by Danelle Moon and Aime McPhearson, April 10, 2006, Bay Area Feminists Oral History Project, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

²⁰ Susie Hammer, interview by Danelle Moon, July 11, 2006, Bay Area Feminists Oral History Project, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

San Jose's feminist political wave in local government coincided with the transition of San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley from a mainly agricultural, suburban area to the heart of the tech industry and what would become Silicon Valley. Women politicians in the South Bay during this time period, such as Hayes, Wilson and Hamer, prioritized areas of slow growth, honesty and integrity in government positions and promotion of women's issues. Janet Gray Hayes ran for mayor in 1974 and then again for re-election in 1978 primarily on the platform of slow, controlled growth of San Jose, opposed to male politicians who were often accused of and depicted as being "in the pockets" of big developers.

The San Jose mayoral election of 1978 between Janet Gray Hayes and Al Garza best illustrates the debated issue of growth in San Jose. While the press and competitors accused Garza of making deals with big developers and industry in San Jose, Hayes ran on a campaign of slow, controlled growth, and maintaining neighborhoods, symbolized by one of her 1978 mayoral reelection campaign slogans, "make San Jose better before we make it bigger."²¹ The local press and *San Jose Mercury News* admired Hayes for her management of the fast-paced growth in San Jose as mayor, by stopping urban



Newsweek, 1978, Folder 4, Box 1, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

²¹ "Five good reasons why you should vote for Mayor Hayes," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 3, 1978.

sprawl, restricting growth, preserving neighborhoods, and lowering taxes, with an aim to avoid a San Jose that grew so fast and out of control that it would resemble Los Angeles.²² This platform appealed to long term residents and families of San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley who wanted to maintain their neighborhoods, schools, and communities in the face of rapid growth, and women who ran on this slow growth platform proved successful against male political opponents with business ties to big developers and industry. When interviewed in 2006, Susan Hammer claimed that women politicians were more responsive to family and neighborhood issues and the humane aspects of what a city should be, rather than being enticed by money offered by big business developers.²³

Women candidates were also depicted by the press and self-identified as honest, trustworthy and less likely to engage in machine politics, government corruption and the influence of big industry and developers. In Susie Wilson's 1978 campaign for San Jose County Supervisor, she is described in a political ad as bringing integrity to the County Board of Supervisors, stressing her honesty, integrity and willingness to "do the right thing for San Jose."²⁴ Janet Gray Hayes was also profiled by the local press for her relationship with the citizens of San Jose and how she took each citizen's need seriously, without the typical red tape and bureaucratic obstruction that separates most voters from their representative, by responding to individual requests by citizens for solutions to local, community issues.²⁵ Women candidates in the South Bay appealed to voters and offered a different version of what it means to be a politician by focusing on local issues and the experiences of local citizens and voters, rather than entering

²² "Mayor Janet Gray Hayes is Santa Clara County's most admired public official." Political Ad, 1978.

²³ Hammer, interview by Danelle Moon, 2006.

²⁴ "Integrity: Susanne Wilson has it!" *San Jose Mercury News*, November 3, 1978.

²⁵ "Mayor Janet Gray Hayes is Santa Clara County's most admired public official." Political Ad, 1978.



Janet Gray Hayes Political Ad, 1978, Folder 21, Box 3, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

politics for personal gain or monetary interest from connections to big business. Janet Gray Hayes believed that most women brought in honesty to the political stage in San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley and a sense of transparency that fueled their success, “I think most women brought in honesty [to the political arena in the San Jose area].²⁶ Local press, like the *San Jose Mercury News*, often characterized male political candidates as being in it for the money, personal gain and business connections, lacking the

local and community understanding and engagement that women politicians time after time displayed.

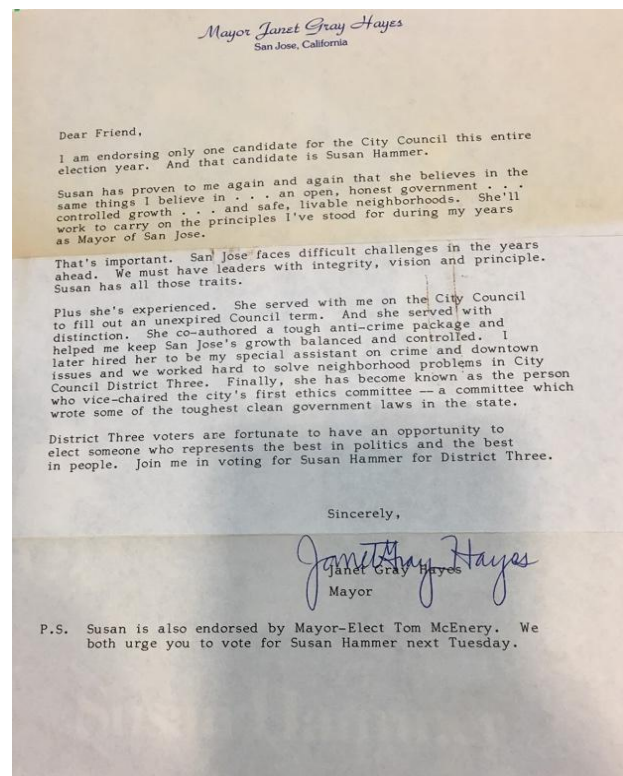
These women ran campaigns based on issue areas particularly concerning their communities, rather than using the “woman card” and focusing their campaigns on their gender or try to appeal especially to women voters. They introduced an honest, down to earth, representative style of politics that was well

²⁶ Hayes, interview by Danelle Moon, 2006.

received in the Santa Clara Valley as it opposed the politics of many male candidates backed by big business. Blanca Alvarado, the first Latino to be elected to the San Jose City Council, ran with the support of her Latino community in East San Jose, and noted how the women elected representatives of San Jose's "Feminist Capital," were community driven, as they all began their political careers in San Jose through local community involvement.²⁷ These women, as mothers and wives, entered the political realm through local community involvement, and with the influence and support of grassroots, political organizations such as NOW and the League, ran for office, and once in office, used their power and position to address local issues brought forward by the community, and issues of women's rights.

Support, Endorsements, Coalition and Mentorship

The attitude and movement of "women supporting women" did not end once women representatives were elected to office, because these women elected officials created opportunities for other women to follow in their footsteps. They encouraged other women to run for office, supporting them through public endorsements, mentorship, and campaigning, with a mutual goal of equal representation of men and women in local government. Hayes used her position and



Endorsement Letter for Susan Hammer from Janet Gray Hayes, 1983, Folder 7, Box 1, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

²⁷ Blanca Alvarado, Interview by Danelle Moon, 2006, Bay Area Feminists Oral History Project, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

influence to support other local women in politics. For instance, she publicly endorsed Blanca Alvarado and Susan Hammer through newspaper endorsements in the *San Jose Mercury News*.²⁸ Hayes publicly endorsed Hammer for San Jose City Council in 1982 through political ads, promoting her as an honest, trustworthy candidate saying, “Susan possesses a rare combination of the many qualities needed by elected officials today: integrity, intelligence, candidness, courage and humor.”²⁹ Hayes also supported and endorsed women, such as Hammer, through corresponding with other politicians and influential people, detailing Hammer’s political experience, her stance on controlled growth in San Jose and livable, safe neighborhoods, and her commitment to open, honest government.³⁰

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the San Jose City Council demonstrated the possibilities of women supporting women once in office, ensuring that women’s voices were heard and respected. Hayes worked to get Iola Williams, the first African American to serve on San Jose’s City Council and later as vice-mayor, and Susan Hammer into office in San Jose’s City Council. Hayes described how difficult politics could be for women due to gender stereotypes and the often accepted notion that a woman's place was not in the political arena; therefore, Hayes stressed the importance of women supporting each other through endorsements and campaign support to get more women into office.³¹ Susan Hammer, former San Jose City Council member and mayor from 1991 to 1999, described how women in political positions tend to be consensus builders and share power among them, further supporting the pattern of women supporting each other politically in San Jose city politics.³² Susie Wilson, who served on the San

²⁸ Moon, "Storming Politics," 7.

²⁹ “Susan Hammer is the most effective voice for City Council District Three.” Political Ad, 1982.

³⁰ Janet Gray Hayes to Friend, 1982, Box 1, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, San Jose State Special Collections and Archives, San Jose.

³¹ Hayes, interview by Danelle Moon and Aime McNamara.

³² Hammer, interview by Danelle Moon.

Jose City Council with Hayes in 1983, remembered how she and Hayes, as the only women councilmembers, would excuse themselves to the women's restrooms during council meetings in order to work on an issue area together, strategize how to get votes, and discuss certain ideas and policies, exemplifying the consensus building and coalitions between women politicians to resist silencing by male majorities.³³ San Jose's Board of Supervisors during the era of the "Feminist Capitol" illustrate the coalition and mutual support of women representatives as they often worked together on certain policies, creating a united female majority rarely found in American politics.³⁴

The relationships of mentorship and mutual support among women elected representatives, candidates and grassroots organizers contributed to the success of the women's movement and second wave feminism in San Jose city politics. Janet Gray Hayes served as a personal mentor and public supporter of Susan Hammer as she ran for San Jose City Council and later for mayor of San Jose. Hayes was also very supportive and influential in the campaigns of San Jose City Council members Susie Wilson and Iola Williams, who partially made up the infamous female majority city council. Looking back, Hammer emphasized the impact of mentorship from women in office to other female candidates and newly elected officials on the success of San Jose's female dominated politics and steps towards female representation: "Women mentoring other women was really important for the success of women becoming or not becoming, but being elected to public office."³⁵

Conclusion

Historian Janet Flammang has asserted that the high numbers and proportion of educated residents in the San Jose area and affluence and wealth of the area created an environment in which

³³ Wilson, Interview by Danelle Moon and Aime McPhearson.

³⁴ Moon, "Storming Politics," 10.

³⁵ Hammer, interview by Danelle Moon.

women politicians could be successful in the 1970s and 1980s compared to other areas of the US because San Jose voters were more progressive.³⁶ However, this paper and thesis challenges Flammang's argument and claims that the success of the second wave feminism in San Jose, characterized by the high number of female elected officials, is due to grassroots political organization and the political and personal support among women elected officials in city positions. Basing the success of the women politicians who made San Jose "the Feminist Capital of the World" solely on the education and wealth levels in the Santa Clara Valley doesn't explain why other affluent, highly educated areas, like Cambridge, Massachusetts or Raleigh, North Carolina didn't boast the same high numbers of women elected representatives in local government. Therefore, women throughout the US, not just in wealthy, educated cities, can learn that women anywhere can gain success in elections and holding office, to create greater gender equality in political representation, by supporting each other through grassroots political organization, campaign support, political endorsements, mentorship and women coalitions as Hayes, Hammer, Wilson and Alvarado did in San Jose.

³⁶ Flammang, "Female Officials," 97-99.